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IMPACT OF TOBACCO ON PUBLIC HEALTH

Why do hundreds of millions of people worldwide still smoke? Tobacco's negative effects on health are many and well described, including increased risks of heart disease and many cancers. In this edition of **World Chronicle,** Dr. Derek Yach, Programme Manager of the Tobacco-Free Initiative at the World Health Organization, talks about the impact of tobacco on public health around the world.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues.

Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

Cigarettes are the only consumer product which, when consumed, kills half of their regular users. As tobacco use declines in many developed countries and is increasing rapidly in many developing countries, tobacco's contribution to the burden of disease will change radically between now and 2020. Looking ahead to 2020, the picture changes dramatically – tobacco will become the largest single health problem, causing an estimated 8.4 million deaths annually. Can anything be done to prevent such a waste of life?

Our guest today is an expert on tobacco issues. He is Dr. Derek Yach, the Project Manager of the Tobacco-Free Initiative at the World Health Organization. Joining me to talk with Dr. Yach are Betsy Pisik of *The Washington Times* and Robert Holloway of *Agence France Presse/AFP*.

Dr. Yach, welcome to **World Chronicle**.

Dr. Yach, coming from a tobacco-free zone in Geneva where you have your headquarters, to UN headquarters here in New York, you must be shocked by the way that you find people happily chain-smoking all over the place in the UN here in contrast to the fact that nobody is allowed to smoke in Geneva. Kofi Annan, the Secretary-General, to the best of my knowledge has tried to follow your excellent example in Geneva but without success partly because diplomats smoke like chimneys. We won't name any names but in the Security Council, I think probably about half of them are smokers. Now, they don't seem t be getting the message that you guys in WHO are trying to put across. Do you have any comments to make on that?

YACH: Well, I think the first problem with the general effect of passive smoking is that the passive smokers are too passive. And I think in the UN building I would hope that the delegates who don't smoke would demand their right to clean air and that Kofi Annan would enforce what he says that he promised to enforce anyway – a totally smoke-free environment in all UN buildings worldwide, which is UN policy. So I think it's a straight question of leadership. When the leadership at the top says there will be no smoking in these buildings there will be no smoking in these buildings, and that's certainly the

experience, not only in WHO but some of the other UN buildings in Geneva and along many of the business lines – the restaurants around the world.

LITTLEJOHNS: How do you manage to get away with it in Geneva when Kofi Annan is unable to do so in New York?

YACH: I think you'd have to ask Kofi Annan that. Maybe there are certain pressures on him not to be visible and forceful about tobacco control. I don't know.

LITTLEJOHNS: But you've got delegates in Geneva too. You have more meetings actually in Geneva than we have here in New York because of all the social and economic things that go on.

YACH: Exactly. And they've been able to constrain themselves when they don't want to smoke and smoke outdoors in most of the settings. There are one or two places still in some of the major UN buildings where we do have smoking but I think it's been fairly dramatically reduced by a lot more visible demanding of it by the delegates themselves and by some of the UN staff.

LITTLEJOHNS: Do you have smoking rooms where people can sneak off and puff away?

YACH: Not in WHO and increasingly not in some of the other UN agencies as well.

LITTLEJOHNS: So nobody in WHO smokes at all?

YACH: Within the building nobody smokes. Of course at lunches you'll find people smoking in different parts outside on the lawns but not even in front of the main entrances do we have smoking.

PISIK: Dr. Yach, what's the ultimate goal for the tobacco initiative? I mean at this point tobacco is a legal crop. Is the idea that some day you'll have zero tolerance, zero smoke?

YACH: I think we draw a distinction between the crop and smoking. We would hope to be able to steadily reduce tobacco consumption down to the lowest possible achievable level which may be one percent eventually a hundred years from now. We don't think that that necessarily implies that tobacco as a crop would or should disappear. We know that already alternative uses for tobacco are being found which may very well increase over the next few years. But realistically, the first point, which we do not believe in, is trying

to impose prohibition. We know the dangers of that from the alcohol experiments of the 20's and 30's but we do believe that we are able to reduce consumption fairly steadily down to levels ten percent, and eventually down to five percent. And who knows what happens at that level.

HOLLOWAY: What kind of alternative uses are you talking about for tobacco?

YACH: For tobacco, currently there are a number of private companies looking at genetically engineering the plant to start producing pharmaceutical products – a wide range of resins – and the kind of products which were never thought would be able to be produced. Because tobacco has a very interesting genetic structure, it lends itself to being a factory for the production of a whole range of other biologically-based goods. We're watching those experiments. We don't think that those are going to be the long-term solution to the massive growing of tobacco in places like Malawi and Zimbabwe but maybe they would be part of the solution.

HOLLOWAY: Could you have a genetically modified cigarette – not a cigarette – but genetically modified tobacco which would make a healthy cigarette?

LITTLEJOHNS: It has been tried I think, hasn't it?

YACH: It has been tried and there's a company here called Vector Incorporated which maintains that they have a genetically engineered plant without the nicotine. The problem is first of all whether the smokers are going to want to continue smoking something like that since it's the nicotine that keeps them addicted and hooked, and second of all it's unclear whether the alleged health benefits are really going to translate into reality. But tobacco companies are putting some of their large resources into trying to find reduced harm products and that certainly is going to be an area we'll have to watch as a world health agency over the next few years.

LITTLEJOHNS: Apart from the fact that at the UN headquarters in Geneva smoking is a no-no, what about the restaurants in Geneva? Is it common for people to smoke in restaurants because here in New York for example, as you probably know, it's pretty much a no-no apart from very small establishments or areas which are reserved for smokers. But in Geneva generally, is it ...

YACH: It's exactly the opposite position. We have good controls in the UN buildings, or better controls; terrible to pathetic tobacco control in the country as a whole.

Here you have good to strengthening tobacco control in the country and in the city and very weak controls in the UN building. One might ask, well is it that things are so weak in Switzerland? And we're beginning to understand that only in the last few months an inquiry which WHO was part of, commissioned by the Swiss Health Department, looked at the complicity of tobacco companies enforcing measures to introduce strong bans on smoking in public places and twice to stop referenda controlling tobacco advertising through a number of underhand measures and ways in which they've worked on a worldwide basis. They have been able to galvanize the restaurateurs in the hotel industry into believing that they will go bankrupt if they start introducing smoke-free areas. Switzerland is now a very important country because it's the home to many of the multinationals who have got their major headquarter there -- whether it's Philip Morris, British American Tobacco, Japan Tobacco -- and they want to maintain it as a smoking environment. So the billboards that have gone in the US are still flying high in Switzerland with virtually no warnings. The smoke-free areas haven't been brought into effect and the price of cigarettes in Switzerland, relative to the economy, is still too cheap.

PISIK: Since you bring that up the point of taxation in the United States at least -- and certainly on the state level there has been an effort to increase the excise tax to make it prohibitively expensive, also to label packs of cigarettes with explicit health warnings. I wonder how effective these means are especially if the states are -- and I'm not sure that they are -- following through with their promises to take this extra revenue that's coming in and turn it around for health purposes at the local level? Is this an effective deterrent?

YACH: The most powerful means of reducing consumption in the middle term is through price. And the tobacco companies have known this and so they have fought extremely hard to stop WHO and national governments, ministries of health, touching the tax levels. In general, people are surprised to hear that the excise levels in the US are among the lower levels in the world, not among the higher levels. We look to countries even like China, my own country, South Africa, the Nordic countries, the UK, Canada, where we have relatively high levels of tax. Wherever tax levels go up above inflation consumption comes down sharply, particularly among the poor and the young. Whenever there is then a let up on it, consumption starts rising again. With regard to warnings, it's a different set of issues. Again, I hate to say it but in the US you virtually need a microscope to notice that there is a

warning on your pack and it's so carefully blended into the pack that you wouldn't notice it after a while. Compare that to Canada where almost half the size of the pack is covered with a ghastly photograph of a lung or some of the serious consequences. The European Union has just voted a directive that will take 40 percent of the pack's size to increase the warning. In countries like Thailand, it's about a third. So again, the US is way behind the rest of the world in warning people about the consequences in a way in which it's truly effective. Many people believe that the truly effective way to move on warnings is to have black and white packaged cigarettes which simply say what the product is, what are the ingredients and then give the full consequences of smoking the product. That, we believe, would also reduce the glamour of the product and have a serious impact on consumption.

LITTLEJOHNS: With a large skull and crossbones. [LAUGHTER]

YACH: And maybe the number of your local doctor – toll-free number.

LITTLEJOHNS: Well we shouldn't laugh about it cause it's really no joke.

HOLLOWAY: You mentioned both Thailand and China in your last reply. I believe that China is probably the most serious problem country but whereas Thailand has been very successful in cutting back. But in general terms you said that consumption of tobacco is increasing in the developing world but dropping in the developed world. Is it possible to generalize and say why that is the case?

YACH: First of all, you're right about China. The magnitude is just mind-boggling – 320 million smokers in China. When British American Tobacco were deciding many years ago where they were going to start their marketing operation, the apocryphal story is that they called for a map of the world and asked where the populations were. And when they saw that this was a population then of several hundred million, they said well clearly that's where we're going. And that partly answers your second question. I think two things are happening. Not only is the number of smokers declining in developed countries the profitability of the industry in developed countries is starting to decline. And to make up for that, of course, companies are trying to increase their marketing, their sales and their profits from developing countries. That's been going on now for a while and again, you can say, well, it's to make up for them but it's also simply a normal marketing practice to be moving to those countries. The concern we have at WHO is that the regulatory legislative and economic environment at the moment does not have good quality tobacco control so

they're moving willingly into markets where they know that they will have very little opposition and sales will be able to increase steadily over the next few years.

LITTLEJOHNS: Dr. Yach, the charges made not so very long ago that the major tobacco countries had deliberately set out to subvert the WHO campaign against smoking I'm not quite sure how that ended up. There was an investigation, I believe, by WHO presumably. What's the situation there and what are your relations, if any, with the tobacco companies apart from being pretty strained, I think?

YACH: Well, I think first of all the inquiry was held and it included a number of top people around the world, including the head of the Swiss Health Department, David Kessler from the US, who was previously head of the FDA, Anke Martini, who is head of Transparency International, Germany, and Fazel Randera, the physician to Mandela and a member of the Truth Commission in South Africa. Their findings are very clear. The tobacco companies had a clear and explicit plan to try and thwart the efforts of WHO to introduce tobacco control policies worldwide. And the strategies included pitting WHO against its sister agencies like the Food and Agricultural Organization, paying consultants to sow doubt about the quality of research on direct or indirect effects of tobacco, setting up a large media campaign to try and say that tobacco is not an issue for the developing world; we should rather focus on issues like cholera and malaria and a whole wide range of these issues. This inquiry has now led to a set of recommendations, which we are implementing, including improving our own conflict of interest clauses. It turns out that tobacco company-paid people have been consultants at WHO without us knowing about it, without them disclosing it. Our Eastern Mediterranean office recently released their own report for the Middle East which showed in even more graphic form the detailed ways in which the tobacco companies have thwarted policies in the Middle East and shortly they will release a second part of their report showing how the companies even went as far as trying to persuade people – some of the leadership of Islam – to argue that tobacco was not *haram* but actually good for people's health. And so it goes on. The result of the inquiry, we believe, has spurned many national inquiries where individual names of people have started emerging. I mentioned Switzerland. An inquiry will soon be released from Finland. One is approaching completion in Israel. We know that the South African government is looking at this. We believe that what this is doing is putting the truth on the table and what we're trying to do is to clean up the policy

environment before we move into a formal convention process or the next phase of the convention process. And there's nothing more powerful than seeing the names of people and the amounts of money they received from tobacco companies. And remember all of this comes from documentary evidence of the tobacco industry's own files, a result of litigation in the US, particularly that in Minnesota a few years ago. Given that, you'd think that we don't talk to the tobacco companies, we don't answer their phones and we have a totally hostile approach. Of course, we have a fundamental difference. They need to continue to make profits for their shareholders; the more profits they make, the more people will die. The only solution, from their point of view, around that inevitable equation is if their products were truly to be reduced-harm products. In that case, you could have a setting theoretically where you'd have continued profits and not necessarily have continued deaths. Because of that, WHO has set up a committee, a scientific committee, where we talk to the scientists from the tobacco companies about the progression of their science so that we'll be able to assess how we're going to be able to judge whether the claims they're going to make to the public health community over the next few years, or the community at large, are in fact valid and true. So we've already met with the Philip Morris scientists, the British American Tobacco scientists, some of those from R.J. Reynolds and we'll shortly meet with many of the others including Japan Tobacco, Korea Tobacco and so on. We've also invited the tobacco companies, along with the public health community, to give their perspective on how the proposed international treaty to control tobacco should look and give their views about what they like and don't like about the process. That's about as far as we believe we should go at this stage in terms of interaction. So yes, we do have interaction. It's strange but it's critical that we continue to talk to them because if they do land up having products that can reduce the cancer and heart disease deaths around the world, we need to be there ready enough to say to the world "this in fact can save lives".

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is Dr. Derek Yach, Project Manager of the Tobacco-Free Initiative at the World Health Organization and evidently a very articulate spokesman for the campaign.

PISIK: I'm just curious. Have the tobacco companies actually registered as NGO's for this process? Are they recognized in the tobacco-initiative process?

YACH: In the convention process only NGOs in official relations with WHO can participate. We have speeded up the process of becoming an NGO in official relations but they have a major stumbling block. They have to have been in working relationships with WHO and ascribe to our mission, goals and objectives. They may very well have been in working relations in a way in which we didn't particular appreciate their work but of course they don't share our mission and objectives.

PISIK: The reason I'm asking is that here in New York there is a convention to eliminate the illegal use of handguns – excuse me, firearms in all their aspects – and a number of firearms manufacturers, advocates, owners, are in fact registered to the process. Part of the rationale is that if you have to work with these people one way or the other you might as well institutionalise that and clear the way for communications. Is this something that's also recognized in Geneva?

YACH: It is recognized that there is only one area where we can work together and that's in terms of reducing the harm of their products. We can't work together on their claims to stop children smoking. We don't believe their motive. We can't work with them on trying to reduce access of children. We don't believe their motive. We don't believe that the type of way that they would want to have reasonable advertising or reasonable accommodation between smokers and non-smokers is the way to go. It will be on their terms. If we didn't have the 40 million pages of documents from Minnesota we may very well have naively gone into a process of interacting at a higher level and having high level discussions in good faith from a public health community. We now know the truth of the reason why they have done the things they've done and they haven't stopped doing them on a worldwide basis.

HOLLOWAY: You said earlier on that price and fiscal policy was the most effective way of reducing consumption so what is it that an international convention or treaty could achieve that aggressive national campaigns cannot achieve?

YACH: Well, I can give you some practical examples. One of the potential downsides of excise taxes is that countries are not increasing their excise taxes in harmony or in some discussion. You have the risk of big potential smuggling problems across borders. Now that isn't to say that smuggling is entirely due to price differentials, which it isn't. There are other factors at play. And we have seen in recent years and months, court cases have

shown the complicity of tobacco companies as well in smuggling in parts of the world. But an international convention could certainly address the transnational issues like smuggling. The second one is that if you take a country like South Africa, which has now imposed a total ban on advertising and marketing, it's still very vulnerable to foreign magazines, to the Internet, to satellite television and to many of the transnational forms of marketing and communication. Those will also receive much higher attention. And then if you go right down to the end, there are the countries which are very concerned about the long-term economic consequences of transitioning out of tobacco. And at least, by working as a world community, we can start ensuring that the resource base for research and development to look at alternative livelihoods is addressed as a community of nations rather than one country by one country.

LITTLEJOHNS: Dr. Yach, what's the attitude of governments by and large because if your campaign is successful they stand to lose a fair amount of money, as you've pointed out, in taxes. Are some of them reluctant to support you?

YACH: I think our colleagues at the World Bank and the IMF would have a little disagreement with that statement. In fact, we believe there's good news for the finance ministries. The good news is that as excise taxes increase revenues continue to grow as consumption declines. We haven't yet hit the point in any of our countries where we started seeing a decline in the revenue to the government even though excise taxes are continuing to increase. This often sounds counter-intuitive, but given the addictive nature of tobacco and the way people respond to price changes – and who will respond – we still have an enormous leeway on a worldwide basis to increase taxes. Are governments being supportive? You must remember we are not beyond the secretariat approach to tobacco control, we are now into a convention being driven by the member states. So the Chair of the convention process, Ambassador Amorin from Brazil, and the member states are now driving what would be the text process and the support is extremely high. This is the first time in the 52-year history of WHO that we have embarked upon the use of our treaty-making authority. And as you are aware, in the areas of environment and labour and human rights this has been the norm to try and put a global governance system in place to address a global problem. This is the first time we're doing it and the member states are coming on extremely fast with extreme enthusiasm, and the degree of preparation that they have done at

home also shows that they are seriously engaged in the process. It's no longer a resolution. They know we are talking about a legally binding treaty.

PISIK: These are nations that are also large consumers and producers of tobacco as well?

YACH: The Chair is from Brazil. We have on record, throughout the process, the commitment of Zimbabwe to the process which has also been on record calling for the communalization of tobacco companies for many of their activities – in Zimbabwe in that case. China has remained supportive right from the beginning. The UK as well. There, of course, will be a number of countries which are home to certain multinationals where we do expect a bit of opposition but to date it hasn't been quite clear which ones those are and how they will play things out over the next few years.

HOLLOWAY: Presumably at some stage, the loss of revenue from tax will be offset by the gains in spending on public health but not necessarily in the same time period I would guess that you have agreed on, have you done sums on that? Have you got figures you could ...

YACH: We have to have some economic analyses with the World Bank and in fact, there's a whole volume which has come out over the last year dealing with the economics of tobacco control, first in the developed world and secondly in the developing world. And the basic notion also is that if people don't spend money on tobacco they tend to spend it on other goods and services. The question in the long run is whether that generates more economic activity in a country, producing more opportunities for jobs than tobacco. The answer generally is yes because tobacco essentially is an agricultural crop which adds very little beneficiation in the process of going to the final product compared to say the information technology area, the biotechnology area, or a whole range of other service related areas as well where there would be more jobs created. The modelling they've done suggests that only in a number of exceptional countries would there be economic hardship in the medium- to long-term. In all countries with net importers there would be immediate benefits of theoretically becoming a tobacco-free society. A country like Bangladesh would gain enormously, for example. The two exceptional countries are Malawi and Zimbabwe where, because of the unique problems of their foreign exchange percentage coming from tobacco, they will need to be given specific support over the long-term.

LITTLEJOHNS: Dr. Yach, we have only a few seconds left but oral gratification and having something to inhale seem to be important things for many people. Do you feel that marijuana might become a substitute for tobacco in that situation?

YACH: We would hope not.

LITTLEJOHNS: You're against marijuana just as you are against tobacco? Is this as dangerous in your view?

YACH: It certainly has impacts on the lung and it certainly has been shown to be an important gateway to a range of other illicit drugs.

LITTLEJOHNS: Dr. Yach, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**.

Our guest has been Dr. Derek Yach, the Project Manager of the Tobacco-Free Initiative at the World Health Organization.

He was interviewed by Betsy Pisik of *The Washington Times* and Robert Holloway of *Agence France-Presse/AFP*.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

ANNOUNCER: Transcripts of the programme may be obtained free of charge by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope to **World Chronicle**, United Nations, Room S-827L, New York, N.Y., 10017.

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